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THE PALACE TO REOPEN IN MAY !

Melanie Marsh
Property Manager,
Fishbourne Roman Palace

Following the Government's announcement an easing the lockdown regulations I have some further information on how the Government's roadmap will work for us. Sadly, we are not in step 2 on 12 April, but in step 3 on 17 May. This means that our plan, given the go-ahead from the Government, is to reopen fully, 7 days a week, from Monday 17 May. We are hoping to utilise some form of pre-bookable experiences however, to raise funds and to keep us in the public's mind, between 12 April to 17 May, in a way that we can under the Government's regulations.

Following the Government's announcement of the new lockdown, we have had a minimum number of staff onsite and have remained closed to the public since October half term. Simon, our gardener, has been in working to keep the gardens looking their best, ready for us to reopen later this year. Rob, our Curator, has been in, keeping an eye on our collections and liaising over some exciting new projects. Charley has been leading on our Education and, with her knowledge and innovation she has set up a virtual workshop offering, whereby schoolchildren can experience the Palace through their computers at home, which helps to bring virtual learning to life for them. We hope to expand on this offer for the future, with the possibility that schools can engage with the Palace from all over the UK and possibly more internationally.

I have been in working part time with Trustees, our Chief Operating Officer, Louise, and the Society's new Business Development Manager, Lindsay, to ensure that the Palace will be at its best when we reopen.

The Government review allows us to begin the reopening process and the return of the rest of our team, who I know have been missing the Palace. □

IO SATURNALIA !

Pam Crowe
Chair of the Friends

As 2021 unfolds I wish I could assure you of a full and successful season to come at the Palace but I can only hope for better news in the spring. Nevertheless, I would like to thank you for renewing your membership of our organisation thus enabling the Friends to go on supporting Fishbourne. You supplied some of the necessary protective equipment against the spread of Covid-19 used in the brief period of opening during the summer last year and we stand ready to assist further when needed. Every day the site is open to visitors contributes to its conservation for future enjoyment and education. So thank you.

At the time of writing this we are not in a position to make firm arrangements regarding our AGM this year but we are discussing options and will update you as soon as possible.

Considering a topic for this edition of our Newsletter I decided to bring you a contrast to the forcibly-subdued Christmastime we all experienced in 2020 with some words about Saturnalia – the most popular of the Roman festivals which took place at the winter solstice. As you will read, there are similarities between some Saturnalian customs and modern Christmas traditions.

Saturnalia honoured Saturn (*Saturnus*) who ruled the cosmos before his son Jupiter (*Iupiter* in Latin) usurped him as king of the gods. *Satus* means 'sprung from' and the festival celebrated the end of the autumn planting. Hence, Saturn's symbol is the sickle or scythe showing his association with agriculture as the god of sowing and seed. The first festival of Saturnalia took place in 497 BC at the dedication of the original Temple of Saturn built at the north-west corner of the Forum in Rome. It was restored by Lucius Munatius Plancus in 42 BC and again in the fourth century AD following a fire. All that still stands today are eight of the columns of its *pronaos* (porch).

The winter solstice was celebrated on 23rd December as the 'birthday of the unconquered sun' (*dies solis invicti nati*). At first the festival lasted only one day but was variously extended, notably by the Emperors Augustus and Caligula, finally settling at a full week from 17th to 23rd December during which a fair was held. It was a time of holiday with no working, even for slaves, and schools and law courts were closed. During the festival of Saturnalia the feet of the god's cult statue were symbolically freed from woollen bonds that tied him for the rest of the year. This may be why Saturn was also associated with liberation – and liberation was the theme of the revelry which followed the sacrifice of a young pig at his Temple. Then, adopting a practice begun by the Greeks in 217 BC as part of their Kronia holiday festivities in honour of Cronus (their equivalent to Saturn), the Romans would assemble for a public banquet (*convivium publicum*).

The social order was turned upside down. A *Saturnalicius Princeps* (Leader of Saturnalia) was appointed from the lower strata of society to lead the chaos and was usually chosen by hiding coins or other small objects in cakes. (Have you ever searched your piece of Christmas pudding looking for the silver sixpence?). It was customary for people to have given money to dependents to enable them to buy goods at the cheaper prices available on the last day of the fair so that they could participate in the custom of exchanging gifts at the public banquet or private parties (sound familiar?). Jellied figs were popular gifts as were wax taper candles (*cerei*) signifying light returning after the winter solstice or small terracotta figurines called *sigilla*.

Children were given toys (as we still do). Homes were decorated with greenery (as now, amidst the tinsel,). People spurned their plainer togas and tunics and donned colourful clothes which would normally be considered in poor taste for daytime wear (don't we all wear something 'special' on Christmas Day?) This practice was known as synthesis – a Greek word. People, masters in particular, would go around wearing a pileus, – a felt hat normally worn by freed slaves (Christmas cracker hats are paper, not felt). Masters waited upon their own slaves who were free to behave like ordinary citizens, including getting drunk! There was gambling (using coins or nuts as stakes), feasting and partying with music and singing. In the second century AD the poet Lucian reported that singing naked was encouraged.

The standard greeting during the festival was "Io Saturnalia" (It has been suggested the Io gave rise to Santa's "Ho, ho, ho"). Mischief ruled with the Saturnalicius Princeps allowed to play pranks, insult guests and chase the women and girls. In the first century AD the poet Gaius Valerius Catullus described it as "the best of times" but the author Pliny the Younger reportedly built ⇨

a soundproof room so as to work without disturbance by the noise of all the merriment. (Did this inspire Charles Dickens' Ebenezer Scrooge?)

For 300 years Christianity had been practiced very much in secret until the conversion of the Emperor Constantine in 312 AD following which it was made legal throughout the Empire. The 6th January had been marked as the arrival of the Magi (Epiphany) and the Resurrection was celebrated at Easter but the birth of Jesus was first noted in the Roman calendar of 336 AD – on 25th December. Was this date deliberately chosen to counteract and suppress the existing festivals for Saturn and also the birthday of Mithras (the Iranian god of light) by absorbing them into the Christian calendar? Throughout history rising religions have incorporated rites from previously predominant ones. For example, the medieval church held the Feast of Fools from 26th to 28th December when the roles of the junior clergy were swapped with those of their superiors. Similarly, the rest of the populace had fun under the orders of the 'Lord of Misrule'. Although the English Civil War killed the appetite for upheaval can we deny that elements of Saturnalia still survive?

I am mindful that for many people 2020's Saturnalia was not Catullus' 'best of times' but I remain confident that there will be cause for celebration of the festival at the end of 2021.

Material for this piece was primarily sourced from the following websites:

Ancient History Encyclopedia (www.ancient.en/Saturnalia)

History (www.history.com - (search Saturnalia)

Wikipedia (www.wikipedia.org – (search Saturnalia)

English Heritage (www.english-heritage.org.uk – (search Saturnalia)

Chichester Asparagus

Nick Sturt
Chairman, Sussex Botanical Recording Society

The splendour of the city of Bath –its terraces and crescents and mansions, all in the mellow local stone –can be appreciated to the full from the perspective of the designated Skyline Walk on the hills which form something of a natural amphitheatre around it. On one such walk some years ago on a cloudless April morning it was natural for the botanist to look at his feet whenever he could wrench his gaze from the man-made beauty filling the larger vista, and on more than one occasion when he did so he recognised the dull greyish-green basal leaves of the plant whose simplified outline graces the way-markers of the trail. The inhabitants of Bath recognise their speciality plant, and in times past they used to harvest it to sell in their markets and further afield as a substitute for Asparagus.

Bath Asparagus in Apuldram Lane (Nick Sturt)

A glance at the distribution map in New Atlas of the British Flora(2002) confirms Ornithogalum pyrenaicum–Bath Asparagus –to have its headquarters in the area immediately around the city, although there is a thin scattering of records over the southern half of Britain. Recent authorities generally treat it as a native but there has from time to time been just the faintest shadow of a doubt about this. The distribution of this species has been the subject of much discussion and a modicum of research, since its first notice by Thomas Johnson when reporting on a plant-hunting tour in the Mercurius Botanicus of 1634: 'Ornithogalum angustifolium majus floribus ex albo virescentibus... Onion Asphodell, Green starre flowre. It growes in the way between Bathe and Bradford [-on-Avon] not farre from little Ashley'.

Because early Bath is associated with the Romans and this Ornithogalum seems to be a native of Rome's homeland and its provinces around the Mediterranean there has long been the theory that the plant came with them. One theory proposes that the bulbs were accidentally imported in the root-balls of the vines which the conquerors planted (no doubt in unflinchingly straight Roman rows!) upon the hillsides around the settlement they called Aquae Sulis. This putative origin is mentioned, along with much else ⇨

of interest, in an essay on the species by David Green in the Wiltshire Flora of 1993. When I made inquiry some twenty or so years ago there was genetic research planned in the hope of shedding light on the populations of Bath Asparagus in the neighbourhood of the city, but I am unaware of any notable results forthcoming.

The question of native or introduction is not one I am competent to tackle: my researches, which have been conducted largely from the comfort of my armchair, centre instead on the presence of Bath Asparagus in a site in Sussex. I have been pressed by the editor on several occasions to set out my thoughts and this time I have run out of excuses. Among the scatter of dots across England for O. pyrenaicum in the New Atlas of the British Florais the hectad

Herbarium specimen collected in Fishbourne by the Rev. Frederick Arnold ca 1870

SU80, narrowed down in the Sussex Plant Atlas and the recent Flora of Sussex to tetrad SU80M and representing finds in Fishbourne outside Chichester. The first record goes back to Dillenius in his famous third edition of Ray's Synopsis methodica stirpium Brtiannicarum, published in 1724. He was informed of the presence here of our plant by his correspondent Mr (or Dr) Manningham of Slinfold and the location is described as 'on the left Hand of a Farm half a mile from Cicester [sic] Southgate in a Meadow plentifully'. In the 19th century Rev. Frederick Arnold, for some years a resident of Fishbourne, knew the species well and evidently in those days it was to be found in a number of places around the village. Today its stronghold is a short section of Apuldram Lane where it survives despite sporadic attempts by the authorities and locals to tidy up the bank in question. The site could well accord with Mr Manningham's.

When the A27 was re-aligned in the 1980s our late Chairman Rod Stern organised volunteers to transplant some bulbs out of the way of danger and a few plants probably arising from this work can usually be seen around the car-park for the parish church and on the verge of the new A259. I have not had any success myself in finding it elsewhere in the village, although it may well be present in private gardens. I should very much like to see it established in the recreated fragment of the garden of Fishbourne Roman palace, because I feel that this could be the origin of the Fishbourne population.

It is ironic that Arnold, an enthusiastic 'antiquarian' as well as a botanist, had no inkling of the astonishing Roman remains beneath his feet. They were excavated in the early 1960s following pieces of mosaic and masonry being unearthed when a water main was being laid across a farmer's field, and the subsequent dig was conducted by a young Barry Cunliffe. What was found turned out to be the relics of by far the largest known Roman building north of the Alps, a villa on such a massive scale as to be termed a 'palace', with the evidence for ownership pointing straight to the client king of the local Regnenses tribe, one Cogidubnus. Since that identification was made historians have corrected the spelling of his name to Togidubnus, but I shall stick with the more familiar form. In a former life I used to teach Classics and eventually adopted the disappointingly modern Cambridge Latin Course: to its credit, this does impart a great deal of worthwhile information about Roman and Romano-British life even if it skimps on the sort of rigorous grammar mastered by pupils of the calibre of our own Priscilla Nobbs. In Unit III there is a story made up which takes King Cogidubnus to Bath to seek a cure for an unspecified ailment from the goddess Sulis at her spring. The spring pre-dates the Romans but with their innate superiority they were happy to assimilate the cult and identify the goddess with the Roman Minerva. For many years I taught the probably fictitious tale ⇨

of the poorly Cogidubnus being plotted against by a dastardly Roman magistrate before I became aware that historians now believe that the lucrative shrine at Aquae Sulis was for a time actually controlled by Cogidubnus. It would not be impossible that he could have made the journey to Bath to inspect it (or, come to that, in order to be cured of some illness), but in any case the link predicates lines of communication between Fishbourne and Bath –lines along which Bath Asparagus might conceivably travel.

What follows are unsubstantiated theories, all of them more or less impossible to test, about how Ornithogalum pyrenaicum could possibly have come to Fishbourne. Firstly and perhaps most obviously, we can leave out any Bath connection and imagine the accidental arrival of bulbs in those root-balls of vines, for vines were surely imported for cultivation in the king's garden as a key symbol of his Romanisation. But let us pursue a putative Bath origin. Perhaps the plant was associated with the goddess and her spring. As a native it could have had cult significance long before the Romans arrived; as an introduction the association will have developed later. Whatever the case, if Bath Asparagus were seen as an accoutrement or part of the paraphernalia or ritual of the goddess Sulis then it would be natural, arguably, for Cogidubnus to acquire some for his garden; or certainly to be sent it by the administrator-priests of the shrine in recognition of his power.

These are, I admit, only theories, but theories which try to account for the remarkable coincidence of a comparatively rare plant in England occurring next door to two major Roman sites. Just as Bath Asparagus has putatively survived since at least Roman times on the slopes once bearing vines around Bath, so it will have been capable of remaining in Fishbourne centuries after the palace was abandoned (around AD 270 following a fire) and its gardens overrun with invading barbarian vegetation. Earlier mention was made of the sale of Bath Asparagus as a vegetable gathered and sold in historical times. Could then the Romans have deliberately introduced the plant for the table? I have been unable to find any written evidence for the consumption of Ornithogalum pyrenaicum by the Romans, not in Pliny's encyclopaedic Natural History, not in Columella's treatise on agriculture, not in the recipes described by Apicius. The word 'asparagus' has a basic meaning of edible shoot in Greek, which was absorbed into Latin, but we know that what we call Asparagus was the same vegetable regarded by the Romans as a delicacy. Apicius recommends that for best results it should be placed in the saucepan with the heads out of the water; and I also remember the historian Suetonius mentioning that a favourite saying of the emperor Augustus was 'quicker than boiled Asparagus', although I shall refrain from speculating about what exactly he had in mind. But returning to the point, I would suggest that the case for Ornithogalum pyrenaicum as a home-grown vegetable at Fishbourne palace is not convincing.

Reference was made earlier to the distribution map in the New Atlas of the British Flora: I should point out that the dot indicating its presence in the Fishbourne hectad is printed in red to indicate introduced status, and the accompanying text notes that the species is cultivated in gardens and can 'escape' and become naturalised. My own palace garden theory, of course, presupposes this ⇨

Photo Malcolm Storey, Bioimages

and we need venture no further to find corroboration than Henfield and Borrer's Bank (TQ21C) where our plant still occurs as a relic of the great man's garden. I should not omit to mention here that I have read the explanation of the presence of Bath Asparagus in Fishbourne as a much later introduction by an unidentified rector of the parish who was previously based in Bath. I suspect, however, that the fact that our plant used to be found in various spots around the village tends to render the horticultural vicar theory a degree less likely.

The romantic in me infinitely prefers Cogidubnus and his Aquae Sulis connection. I imagine the material being conveyed by the Imperial post service and, after a cursory inspection by the King, being handed over to the Head Gardener to nurture with due care. And it is pleasant while pausing in Apuldram Lane and admiring the handsome flowering spikes to conjure up the unprovable link to Roman Britain of nearly 2000 years ago. If this thought helps to ensure the survival of Bath Asparagus in this site then so much the better.

*As a postscript I must mention that in the course of writing this I have been reminded of SBRS stalwarts connected with our Ornithogalum. I recalled that Anne de Potier of the Chichester Harbour Conservancy had been in the working party which transplanted the bulbs and when I asked her she kindly recounted what she remembered of the operation. I should not neglect to mention Judy Wilson who for probably more than thirty years has been making a pilgrimage to the main site every June in order to monitor the population.

Comment by Rob Symmons, Curator, Fishbourne Palace:

"I have been saying for a while now that if the Romans were bringing exotic animals to the site, then it's inconceivable that they weren't doing the same with plants. Given what we already know about the presence of exotic animals at Fishbourne, the Palace team have for a long time been keen to explore the possibility that exotic plants were also imported by the Romans. Maybe DNA analysis of Bath asparagus and other non-native plants in the locality will…. "bear fruit".

Chedworth Roman Villa

Did you see that a mosaic has been discovered at the National Trust site of Chedworth, 8 miles north of Cirencester (Corinium Dobunnorum), the second-largest town in Roman Britain, which was laid after the departure of the Roman legions from Britain? The National Trust website says that "charcoal and bone sealed within a foundation trench in the north range have provided radiocarbon dates that show that the wall could not have been built until after AD 424 and that a mosaic must be later than this date."

However, this mosaic is of poorer quality than the well-made mosaics dating to the late 4th century in the Villa, and contains several mistakes in its design, possibly evidence that the mosaicists had become less skilled by this time.

Martin Papworth a National Trust archaeologist, says: "It is interesting to speculate why Chedworth Villa's owners were still living in this style well into the 5th century. It seems that in the West Country, the Romanised way of life was sustained for a while."

(See www.nationaltrust.org.uk/chedworth-roman-villa)

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